

Donica Belisle, *Purchasing Power: Women and the Rise of a Canadian Consumer Culture*. Toronto: [University of Toronto Press](#), 2020. ix + 262pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth; ISBN 9781442631137, \$85.00, Paper; ISBN 9781442629110, \$29.95.

The private realm of domesticity and the public realms of the state and the marketplace are often considered as opposing realms. The women in Donica Belisle's new book clearly believed that the intimate spaces of their households were connected to wider social, economic, and political arenas, specifically through their purchasing decisions.

Belisle draws on archival records, publications, and a wide range of teaching and print materials left by different women's organizations to explore connections between domesticity, feminism, purchasing power, patriotism, and class. It is clear from the outset that store bought goods and services are already an integral part of everyday life for the majority of Canadians. Belisle focuses on the connections women themselves made between consumption practices, organizational objectives, and the broader project of nation-making they were also always committed to.

The six chapters overlap in time, moving forward through the first half of the twentieth century. Each explores a different discourse involving consumption and consumer goods. These include the campaigns of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU); advocacy for patriotic consumption on the home front during World War One; the curricula of new home economics programs that trained students to become experts in the science of shopping; the producer-consumer concerns of the Women's Institute, (WI), the largest rural women's organization in Canadian history; fashion and feminism; and the possibility of alternative and more cooperative forms of retail distribution. Each chapter has an introductory section that provides context after which themes of consumption are foregrounded to illuminate the progressive development of consumer culture and consumer society.

Although they championed different causes, the women we meet are a relatively influential and privileged group, members of Canada's white Anglo-Saxon middle and upper-middle classes. As articulate advocates for a range of causes, these women consistently asserted that consumer spending was a powerful force to be leveraged for the betterment of the nation and to advance the welfare of Canadian families with the implication that women should have greater control over family spending. Their understandings of civic-minded spending are broadly defined but closely aligned with the preferences of their class and ethnicity. In effect, they called for tactical spending to advance the values and practices they believed in.

These women were not naïve. They were suspicious of false advertising, high marked up prices, and fashion trends. They championed thrift, modesty, and temperance; but they were also convinced that purchasing power could be deployed to effect positive change. The voices in Belisle's book are not those of radical feminists. They accepted that women bore the principal responsibility for family well being; however, they did not see why gendered divisions in the home would keep them from the civic sphere. They often formed alliances with retailers and other businesses because they shared broadly similar commitments to modernity and to capitalism. The WCTU, for example, accepted advertising in their publications and promoted new products in the recipes they shared with members. Although the advance of consumer

society is commonly associated with urbanization, Belisle shows that Women's Institutes shared the same interests in modern goods and the growing consumer economy as their urban counterparts, welcoming department store sponsorships and associating the WI organization with different brand products. Home economics classes studied new trends in kitchen appliances and home decorating and took field trips to Eaton's and Simpson's to familiarize themselves with the mechanisms of retail distribution. The integration of domestic spending into conversations and strategies of prominent women's organizations steadily built support for Canada's growing consumer economy. The promotion of time and labour saving appliances that reduced the drudgery of housekeeping and the packaged modern foods that promised better nutrition and food safety directly supported local and regional manufacturing and food processing industries.

As for the goods themselves, there was general agreement across different organizations that store-bought goods provided respectability and opportunities for self-expression and pleasure as well as highly practical benefits. Because domestic spending involved goods acquired in different ways and used for different purposes, household resources could be deployed in different ways. Rather than resist consumption, these women's groups tended to propose alternatives. If husbands abstained from alcohol, the money saved could be redirected to better clothing, food, furniture and housing for women and children. Encouragement to conserve and preserve foods and metals during World War One went hand-in-hand with 'Buy Canadian' campaigns, and so on. The best choices inevitably aligned with Anglo-Canadian middle-class values and home-making practices. Over time, these various discourses of good and proper consumption helped to reinforce their own commitments and strengthen patterns associated with respectability, modernity, patriotism, and thrift (now understood as good value for money).

Common gender did not automatically lead to agreement. Made in Canada campaigns, for example, privileged the interests of central Canadian manufacturers over those of western agriculturalists. Thrift campaigns initiated by the government in support of the war effort were enthusiastically supported by affluent club women but tended to be ignored and mocked by lower income housewives. Purchasing power created boundaries of exclusion as well as belonging. Elevating the domestic practices of some simultaneously marginalized the experiences of others. And of course it should be noted that consumerism was only one theme in the expansive writings of these organizations; individuals agreed and disagreed with each other about these and other issues.

Purchasing Power challenges a number of commonly accepted dichotomies. It is clear that rising consumption need not be associated with declining citizenship or lack of interest and engagement in civic affairs. Domesticity did not exist purely in opposition to market forces nor were women simply co-opted by big business. Women recognized they had power as consumers and sought to leverage their power to influence a range of issues. Domestic spending, they believed, could be a force to help make better Canadians, Canadians who would be more like themselves.

Purchasing Power is an important addition to growing bodies of work examining the progressive development of Canadian consumer society, domesticity, feminism, consumer activism, social change, and the entrenchment of the liberal order. There is new information on well known organizations and new research into the Women's Institute and the beginnings of Canadian

programs in home economics that should provide the inspiration for further research. This well written study is suitable for undergraduate and graduate students and can also be enjoyed by general readers.

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